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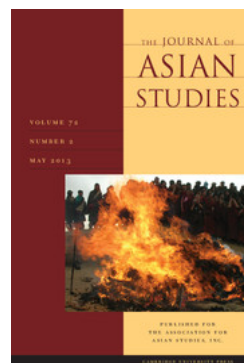
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## Dalit Revolution? New Politicians in Uttar Pradesh, India

**CRAIG JEFFREY, PATRICIA JEFFERY,  
AND ROGER JEFFERY**

*This paper uses recent field research to challenge the widely held view that a “Dalit revolution” is occurring in North India. Drawing on two years’ ethnographic research in a village in western Uttar Pradesh, the authors uncover the growing importance of a generation of local political activists among Dalits (former untouchables) while also showing that these young men have not been able to effect a broad structural transformation at the local level. The authors use this case to identify a need for further research on South Asian political change that links party political transformation to questions of local level social practice and subaltern consciousness.*

THERE IS A WIDESPREAD consensus among political scientists that a “Dalit revolution” is taking place in North India. Building on an analysis of party politics and electoral transformation, scholars have written of a substantial change in the relationship between caste and power since the early 1990s (e.g., Jaffrelot 2003; Kohli 2001). This paper brings new evidence to bear on this argument by focusing on Dalit politics at the local level, with particular reference to a new generation of low-caste political activists in Uttar Pradesh (UP). In the villages and small towns of UP, educated Dalit young men have come to challenge the power of dominant sections of society, raising political awareness among marginalized populations and communicating new political and cultural ideas to their communities. As might be expected, analysis of these self-styled “new politicians” provides some support for the notion of a Dalit revolution. But there is as yet little evidence that Dalit political activists have effected a substantial change in the distribution of economic, social, and political opportunities in rural UP. Contrary to the idea that close analysis of local dynamics will uncover instances of unexpected agency, we use ethnographic fieldwork in a single village to emphasize the limited and contradictory achievements of Dalit political change “on the ground.” Our UP case study questions not only the progressive teleology of

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recent accounts of North Indian Dalit revolution but also the dialectic between democratic political structure and low-caste agency on which political scientists construct their analyses.

Empirically, then, the paper documents the important but as yet limited role played by a new generation of Dalit political actors in improving their community's access to various social goods.<sup>1</sup> We point to the piecemeal nature of Dalit new politicians' efforts to act as political and cultural brokers for their community. Conceptually, the paper restates the importance of local-level ethnographic work for understanding the dialectics of dominance and resistance within and beyond rural India. Although village-level studies no longer provide a privileged "window" on processes of social change in India (e.g., Mendelsohn 1993), recent analyses of political change in India have moved too far in the other direction. These aggregative or broad survey-based accounts frequently fail to take seriously the evidence offered by in-depth village-level research. Among the most important consequences of this scholarly trend is a tendency to exaggerate the impact of political shifts at the state and national levels and to gloss over people's consciousness of political change.

We elaborate these arguments through reference to the political economy of Uttar Pradesh, which is outlined in the next section of the paper, and existing literature on political transformation in UP, which is introduced in the third section of the paper. The fourth section of the paper provides a brief description of the local political economy of the village in which we worked. This serves as a preface to the empirical "core" of our argument: an account of Dalit new politicians and their political and cultural work. We show how Dalit new politicians' attempts to co-opt and colonize state institutions are effectively "counter-resisted" by a dominant caste of Jats. We then consider the similarly limited efforts of new politicians to circulate discourses of Dalit empowerment. Dalit leaders' narratives of low-caste political change are important in reshaping the symbolic political terrain in the locality, but the majority of our low-caste respondents felt disillusioned by new politicians' ideas of progress. The conclusion examines the implications of these observations for contemporary understandings of Dalit empowerment in India.

## POLITICAL REVOLUTION IN UTTAR PRADESH

Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India, containing 166 million people in 2001 (Office of the Registrar General 2001). On most indices of development, UP ranks among the two or three most impoverished states in India (Drèze and Gazdar 1997; World Bank 2002). In the 1990s, the gross domestic product of UP rose at an average of 1.3 percent a year, less than a third of the

<sup>1</sup>We make this argument at greater length in our book (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008).

national average. According to the World Bank (2002), 31 percent of UP's population lived in poverty in 2000, significantly higher than India's average of 26 percent, and UP is commonly grouped with Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan as one of the states most in need of development support.

The liberalization of the Indian economy from the mid-1980s onward has tended to deepen rather than alleviate regional and social inequalities in wealth across Indian states (see Ahluwalia 2001) and within UP (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh 2002; Sen 1997). This is especially evident in the area of employment generation (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh 2002). Outside metropolitan areas, economic reforms have reduced opportunities for government employment, historically an important source of salaried work in rural areas. In 2001, the World Bank made an annual 2 percent cut in the number of government employees a condition of its continuing aid in UP. In addition, liberalization has often failed to generate private-sector jobs (Sen 1997). Simultaneously, economic reform has frequently reduced the availability of rural credit and therefore possibilities for entrepreneurialism (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh 2002).

In the social arena, liberalization has had a negative impact on the public provision of basic welfare, as is evident in the case of education. Literacy rates in UP are below national levels; in 2001, 70 percent of males and 43 percent of females over the age of seven were literate in UP compared to nationwide figures of 76 percent and 54 percent, respectively (Office of the Registrar General 2001). Until the early 1990s, the state was expanding its financial support for government schooling. Since that time, neoliberal economic reforms have undermined government educational provision (Mooij and Dev 2002). With the exception of a small number of elite colleges, government educational institutions typically lack teaching aids and equipment, catering facilities, and basic amenities (Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey 2005; Kingdon and Muzammil 2003). Moreover, the midday meal scheme designed to reduce the number of dropouts and increase school enrollment has been a widespread failure in the state (Hasan 2001). Similar processes of decay have been described in recent work on UP's health care initiatives (Baru 1998), antipoverty programs (Drèze and Gazdar 1997), and public distribution system (Shankar 2001). For example, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008) have recorded sharp cuts in UP state expenditures on clinics, hospitals, and medical staff recruitment since the early 1990s that have had a drastic impact on the rural poor. Widespread corruption within government bureaucracies and a wholly inadequate system of taxation further threatens the well-being and security of impoverished communities and prevents the state from securing funds for its developmental and revenue functions (Hasan 2001).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>In 2001, Uttar Pradesh had the lowest ratio of per capita tax revenue to per capita income of all states in India (Shankar 2001).

By 2000, the state's indebtedness corresponded to nearly two-fifths of annual state income (Singh 2000).

This pattern of state neglect, which has a disproportionately negative impact upon the poor, reflects the entrenched nature of caste and class inequalities in UP (Jeffery and Lerche 2003). UP's population may be roughly divided into three social blocs. A first bloc comprises upper-caste Hindus, principally Brahmins and Thakurs, who constitute roughly 20 percent of the population of UP. As substantial landowners, these castes dominate lucrative salaried employment, local government bureaucracies, and landownership in many parts of the state (Hasan 1998).

A second bloc of households belonging to the Hindu "intermediate castes" frequently controls access to political and economic power in parts of rural UP (Lerche 1999). This category of households includes the Jats and upper sections of the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBCs), such as the Yadavs. Jats make up just over 2 percent of the total population of UP but often act as local "dominant castes" in western parts of the state (Srinivas 1955); they monopolize land-ownership, nonagricultural sources of wealth, and influence within local state institutions (Jeffery and Lerche 2000). Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, this "new rural elite" was powerfully represented within state and central government (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Hasan 1998). This political power allowed prosperous Jat farmers to benefit from high agricultural support prices and large subsidies on agricultural inputs.

The remainder of UP's population is mainly composed of Muslims, poorer castes within the OBC category, often called Most Backward Castes (MBCs), and Dalits. *Dalit* means "broken" or "oppressed" in Hindi and most commonly denotes those formerly classed as "untouchable" within the Indian caste system.<sup>3</sup> There are elites among Muslims and Dalits in the UP countryside and a substantial stratum of wealthy Muslims in many UP towns and cities. But rural households among Muslims, Dalits, and MBCs typically possess little or no agricultural land and work in exploitative, poorly paid, and insecure conditions. This is especially true of Dalits, who have historically suffered from the stigma associated with being classed as "untouchable" (Mandelbaum 1970). At the same time, Dalits have been the target of successive government efforts to raise their standing. In the 1930s, the British created lists of formerly untouchable castes deemed eligible for special government assistance, called the "Scheduled Castes" (SCs). The Indian constitution offered SCs legal equality and reserved places in public-sector employment, educational institutions, and government representative bodies (Béteille 1992; Galanter 1991). In spite of reservations, Dalits in UP—most of whom can claim SC status—continue to be concentrated among the poor and confined to manual labor or small-scale

<sup>3</sup>The term *Dalit* is also sometimes used to refer to oppressed people in general in India.

entrepreneurship in the informal economy (Lerche 1999; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998).

For most of the postcolonial period, political parties have either ignored or reinforced social inequalities based upon class, caste, and religion in UP (Hasan 1998). Between 1947 and the mid-1960s, the high castes largely dominated local, regional, and statewide organizations representing the powerful Congress Party (Brass 1985; Chandra 2004). During this period, the high castes strengthened their control over urban economic opportunities, protected their rural landholdings, and in numerous other ways defended the boundaries of their privilege against the incursions of an increasingly voluble but as yet relatively unorganized set of lower castes (Hasan 1989).

The 1967 election marked the beginning of a new phase in UP politics, one characterized by a decline in the capacity of the Congress Party to exert sustained control over elections to the state assembly and by the rise of middle- and lower-ranking castes. This shift was also marked by the emergence of powerful “farmers’ parties” under the stewardship of the Jat politician Charan Singh that won power in UP in 1969 and 1977 and exerted considerable influence on state policy well into the 1980s. These parties provided a vehicle for rural members of UP’s middle castes, especially the Jats and upper sections of the OBCs, to enhance their control over landholding and influence local political organizations and state bureaucracies, particularly in western parts of the state (Jeffrey 2000, 2001, 2002; Lerche 1995). Indeed, the rural dominant castes were partially able to maintain their hold over local government bureaucracies and access to state largesse in the 1990s and 2000s, particularly during the period in which Mulayam Singh Yadav, a member of the intermediate Yadav caste, was chief minister of UP between 2003 and 2007.

A third phase of UP politics, beginning in the early 1990s, has been associated with the political rise of Dalits, especially the emergence of the pro-Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).<sup>4</sup> The BSP was formed out of a national trade union for Dalit government employees founded in 1978 by Kanshi Ram, a Dalit who had converted to Sikhism. This trade union—the All India Backward (SC, ST, OBC) and Minority Communities Employee’s Federation (BAMCEF)—comprised mainly Dalit government employees and sought to fight caste discrimination within the civil service. In December 1981, Kanshi Ram expanded his political activities by launching a political party, the Dalit Sohsit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4), which contested its first elections in Haryana in 1982. The BSP took over the mantle of the DS-4 in 1984. The BSP increased its share of votes in the UP assembly elections from 9.4 percent in 1991 to 23.2 percent in 2002, and the BSP formed coalition governments in UP in 1993, 1995, 1997, and

<sup>4</sup>This section draws on the accounts of the BSP’s history available in Ian Duncan (1997, 1999), Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany (1998), Zoya Hasan (1998), and Christophe Jaffrelot (2003).



2002. In April 2007, the BSP won a landslide victory in the state elections, capturing power on its own for the first time and securing 30.6 percent of the vote. Mayawati, a Dalit woman and former school teacher, has led the BSP since 1995.

Under Mayawati, the BSP has been formally committed to assisting “the majority of society” (*bahujan samāj*). In practice, the party has sought to raise the political, economic, and social standing of Dalits, especially members of the most populous and politically influential Dalit caste in UP, the Chamars. The BSP has pursued this goal through two interlinked but distinct political strategies. First, it has aimed to transform the symbolic landscape of UP through the creation of parks, statues, and libraries dedicated to Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and other Dalit heroes, and by renaming hospitals, educational institutions, and stadiums along similar lines. The acme of this iconographic program was the creation of a hugely expensive park in the UP state capital, Lucknow, in honor of the Dalit hero E. V. Ramaswami Naicker. Second, the BSP has advanced a strategy of what Kanchan Chandra (2004) calls “patronage politics”: strategies that entail altering or effecting the implementation of existing government policies rather than the enacting of new legislation. For example, the BSP has attempted to change the character of the Indian bureaucracy by transferring Dalits into key positions within government. During her six-month tenure as chief minister in 1997, Mayawati transferred 1,350 civil and police officers (Jaffrelot 2003, 419), made stringent efforts to recruit Dalits into the police, and improved Dalits’ access to reserved positions in government training and professional courses.<sup>5</sup> In these ways, Mayawati significantly increased the number of legislators and senior civil servants from Dalit backgrounds (Hasan 2001). Mayawati also tried to instill a “climate of fear” among government bureaucrats by threatening or performing disciplinary action and implementing a measure—often called the “SC/ST atrocities act”—that made discrimination against SCs and STs (Scheduled Tribes) punishable with imprisonment. She is pursuing this strategy with equal vigor during her current tenure as chief minister (*The Hindu* 2007). In addition, Mayawati has extended the Ambedkar Village Program, which allots special funds for infrastructural development to villages with large proportions of Dalits.

The efforts of the BSP to improve Dalits’ access to power have intersected with changes in the formal system of local government in India. In 1992, the 73rd Amendment Act was enacted with the goal of increasing the power of local government in India. The act implemented a three-tier system of local government in all states of India with populations of over two million people. Under this new system, village councils (*panchāyats*) would play a central role in the provision of public services, the creation and maintenance of public goods, and the planning and implementation of development activities. The act also

<sup>5</sup>For example, in 1997, Mayawati reduced the qualifying marks for OBCs, SCs, and STs in post-graduate medical and diploma courses from 35 percent to 20 percent (Froystad 2005, 230).



provided a periodic 33 percent reservation of *panchāyat* seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women and made provisions for *panchāyat* elections every five years.

The rise of the BSP must be read alongside the emergence of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a political force. The BJP held power in Lucknow three times between 1990 and 2005 and governed India between 1998 and 2004. During these periods of rule, the Hindu Right improved the economic resources, social connections, and cultural capital of upper-caste Hindus through its economic policies, political stratagems, and ideological drive (see Hasan 1998). The ascendancy of the BJP in electoral politics and the increased visibility of related Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the Rashtriyaswayam Sewak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad, has also provided a vehicle for the upper and middle castes to reassert their social power—what Corbridge and Harriss (2000) have described as an “elite revolt”—even while the BJP has made political overtures toward some sections of the Dalit castes in UP (see Hasan 2001) and has occasionally formed strategic alliances with the BSP.

To summarize, the recent political history of UP has tended to bolster the position of dominant sections of society. At the same time, the rise of the BSP seems to have provided some Dalits with opportunities to raise their political and economic standing. The scale of this “transformation” and the degree to which it constitutes revolutionary change is open to considerable doubt, as we show in the next section of the paper.

#### INTERPRETING POLITICAL CHANGE

There has been much debate over how to interpret Dalit political transformation in Uttar Pradesh. Two distinctive perspectives can be distilled from the existing scholarly literature. A first view, expressed by Ashutosh Varshney (2000), Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) and Sudha Pai (2000, 2002), is that the rise of the BSP has been bound up with a profound, ongoing transformation in low-caste access to useful social networks, local political power, and cultural respect. For example, Varshney (2000) suggests that, although the BSP has not substantially improved the economic position of ordinary Dalits, it is benefiting Dalits at the symbolic, organizational, and political levels in many parts of North India. He claims that Dalits are increasingly in a position to challenge the legitimacy of caste discrimination and to engage in everyday politics. If democracy is defined as the capacity to contest and participate in politics (Dahl 1998; Laclau and Mouffe 1985), UP has become much more democratic since the early 1990s, even if it remains highly unequal in economic terms. More controversially, Varshney claims that the type of widespread lower-caste mobilization associated with South India in an earlier period—when a broad anti-upper caste movement combined with radical class politics led to

large-scale social and political gains—is likely to be played out again in the urban streets and village lanes of North India. “North India today, and in future, may not follow in South India’s footsteps entirely, but the rise of lower-caste politics in the North already bears striking similarities” (Varshney 2000, 40).

Kohli has also argued that, even where Dalits have not achieved substantial economic mobility, they have benefited from new forms of party political representation in other ways. Kohli focuses especially on the symbolic opportunities that political change may provide for social groups historically stigmatized within society:

The politics of caste is often the politics of dignity: goals sought are less broad-based education and health, but more respect, equality of treatment, and symbolic gains. As a result, inclusion of caste leaders into visible positions of power has often satisfied—at least so far—the demands of lower-caste groups. (2001, 16)

Jaffrelot’s (2003) scholarship complements Varshney’s work and also parallels Kohli’s emphasis on the importance of symbolic social change in processes of Dalit uplift. Drawing upon interviews with leading politicians, analysis of electoral data, and archival research, Jaffrelot maintains that the rise of Dalits within UP politics constitutes a “silent revolution” in Indian political organization that includes, but also moves beyond, symbolic change. Like Varshney, Jaffrelot underlines the significance of education and state-led positive discrimination in processes of Dalit political transformation. Reservations in educational institutions and government employment offered enterprising Dalits economic prosperity and the skills required to coordinate political campaigns. Jaffrelot then argues that a newly emergent cohort of Dalit political leaders effected a significant transformation in village UP, wherein “power has been transferred, on the whole peacefully, from upper castes to various subaltern groups” (2003, 271). Like other authors, Jaffrelot cautions against exaggerating lower-caste empowerment: He identifies the partial nature of their political achievements and counter-resistance among the higher castes. But more than Varshney and Kohli, Jaffrelot claims that many ordinary Dalits are using their newly acquired political representation at the state level to markedly improve their access to local political resources, social contacts, and economic goods in the UP countryside. Jaffrelot also makes the bolder argument that, insofar as a revolution has not occurred, it will work itself out “in the next “several decades” (2003, 494).

The research of Pai (2000, 2002) provides some village-level support for Jaffrelot’s and Varshney’s argument that a significant “Dalit revolution” is occurring in rural UP. Building on survey research conducted in three villages on the outskirts of Meerut City, western UP, Pai points to the rise of a new generation of educated, securely employed Chamar young men who have overturned established relationships of dominance. These men represent Dalit interests within *panchāyats*, act as intermediaries between their community and the state, and

organize social mobilization. Pai (2000) argues that these men have spearheaded a “transfer of power” in provincial UP from the dominant groups to Dalits. Akhil Gupta (1998) makes a more cautious but broadly similar set of claims using ethnographic fieldwork in Alipur, Bulandshahr District, western UP. Gupta argues that there has been a shift in the relationship between rich and poor in Alipur as a result of the rise in nonfarm employment, the decline of the traditional system of exploitative labor relations, and the strengthening of local government *panchāyats*. Gupta charts a move from a relationship of bondage, whereby low-caste agricultural laborers were tied to particular forms of work on the farms of richer cultivators, to a relationship of brokerage, wherein rich farmers depend upon the votes of the poor to be elected onto the village council.

These positive accounts of Dalit political transformation dovetail with some ethnographic studies of political change outside UP, especially Anirudh Krishna’s (2004) description of Dalit political brokerage in rural Rajasthan and Gujarat. Building on broad-based survey evidence and structured interviews, Krishna argues that a set of low-caste new leaders is playing a major role in generating valuable social connections with actors outside the village—or what he calls, following Robert Putnam (1993), “social capital”—at the local level. By acting as brokers between rural people and the state, these new leaders not only provide new avenues for marginalized people to obtain political leverage but also contribute to the erosion of caste-based identities.

Our account of ground-level political change in western UP supports the work of Varshney, Jaffrelot, Pai, and Krishna in certain respects. Like these authors, we show that the rise of low-caste politics has altered local-level political dynamics. We make this argument through attention to the practices of that cohort of “counterelites” that Varshney and Jaffrelot imagine to be leading processes of Dalit political mobilization: the brokers, animators, and “link men” who figure prominently, too, in a much earlier strain of political anthropology (see especially Bailey 1957; Khare 1984; Robinson 1988) and most explicitly in Krishna’s (2004) recent scholarship. But we are more pessimistic than Jaffrelot, Varshney, and others about the capacity of a new set of local-level Dalit political brokers to promote democratization in the absence of structural transformation. The “new politicians” we describe have certainly altered the flavor of local politics in our research area, but they have not changed the political mood of Dalits in the village and have done very little indeed to alter the low castes’ bargaining power with respect to dominant caste farmers, who themselves are engaged in vigorous forms of local-level mobilization. Our analysis suggests that a vibrant political movement expressing cultural demands is unlikely to achieve democratization—in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s (1985) sense—without a radical shift in the distribution of economic and social opportunities on the ground. Indeed, most Dalits in rural UP are far from satisfied by piecemeal symbolic gains and feel isolated and disheartened by their exclusion from basic development goods.

In making these arguments, our account is part of a wider set of studies to question the link between the rise of the BSP and the emergence of more democratic forms of politics in UP (see Hasan 2001; Lerche 1999 for reviews). For example, in their five-village study of western UP, G. K. Lieten and Ravi Srivastava (1999) conclude that local government institutions remained under the purview of the dominant castes throughout the 1990s. Lieten and Srivastava argue that the BSP's Ambedkar Village Program failed to redistribute social goods and political opportunities to Dalits and that "[development] benefits have accrued mostly to people with a nexus with the *pradhān* (village head) or local officials" (1999, 264; see also Dube 1998; Lieten 1996). Craig Jeffery and Jens Lerche (2000) also demonstrate how local elites continued to co-opt local government bureaucracies and prevent Dalits from participating in meaningful ways in village politics even after Mayawati's rise to power. These studies also stress the BSP's failure to intervene in rural disputes over land and labor or to formulate economic policies that would address problems of poverty and inequality in the state. As both Lerche (1999) and Zoya Hasan (2001) conclude, even where tightly structured relationships of exploitation between the higher castes and lower castes have been eroded, Dalits in rural UP are very poorly placed in local land and labor hierarchies, and this greatly limits their capacity to contest and participate in politics (see also Brass 1997; Gupta 1997; Singh 1992). Outside UP, Stuart Corbridge et al. (2005) are similarly equivocal about the empowering potential of village-level brokerage among Dalits in their survey of poor people's access to development resources in Bihar and West Bengal. They note the rise of an energetic cohort of social animators among Dalits but also stress the highly contingent and reversible nature of the processes of democratic advance underpinning their rise (see also Chowdhry 2007).

Our evidence broadly supports these evaluations of low-caste political progress, which, though not wholly divergent from the work of Jaffrelot and Varshney, place greater emphasis on structural continuities, barriers to democratization, and the sustained exclusion of most Dalits from effective forms of political action and expression. By adopting a relational perspective—one that considers Dalit strategies alongside those of the higher castes—we argue that Dalit new politicians face multiple class- and caste-based constraints in contesting established structures of power in the present UP context. In particular, our grounded account of the extent and nature of democratization highlights the difficulty of assuming that UP is set upon the type of "path to democratization" associated with revolutionary change in South India. As Patrick Heller has argued, low-caste democratization in South India occurred in a "favourable and really quite unique institutional and political environment" (2000, 507), and UP lacks, in particular, the history of broad-based class mobilization that underpinned democratization in many parts of the south.

We advance our argument mindful of a tendency within recent assessments of political transformation at the ground level in rural UP to screen out analysis

of Dalits' own understanding of the transformations in which they are embedded; while the studies of authors such as Lietaen and Srivastava (1999) provide important ground-level data, they fail to give sufficient space to the expressive practices through which Dalits understand and seek to navigate their continued subordination. Inspired by other attempts to understand political subjectivities in South Asia (Hansen 1996; Kakar 1989), in this paper we link questions of resistance to the processes through which Dalits express their insecurities and to the affective dimensions of low-caste lives. To the extent that caste-based political transformations *have* taken place in rural UP, these changes have been far from "silent" (Jaffrelot 2003) but rather associated with loud rhetorical efforts to express Dalit voice and equally strident efforts by threatened elite groups to counter Dalit power.

### RURAL BIJNOR DISTRICT

Our research took place in Bijnor District in western UP.<sup>6</sup> Bijnor District's economy is predominantly agricultural, based on sugarcane, wheat, and rice cultivation. Between 1960 and 1990, new agricultural technologies and high government support prices for key cash crops increased agricultural profits and the demand for labor. The construction in 1984 of a new road across the Ganges opened up direct links between Bijnor and Delhi and promoted commercial growth. Nevertheless, Bijnor District lacks a substantial manufacturing base and is situated outside the area of rapid industrial expansion occurring in neighboring UP districts further west.

The depressed economy in Bijnor District placed particular pressure on young people seeking nonagricultural work. Government employment opportunities in Bijnor District were concentrated in health, schooling, transport, and the police. The liberalization of the Indian economy has reduced openings in these spheres, while flows of investment capital almost wholly bypassed Bijnor District in the fifteen years following economic reform. As a consequence, the number of salaried jobs in Bijnor District declined sharply in relation to the demand from high school matriculates in the 1980s and 1990s.

Our rural field research on Dalit politics was concentrated in the village of Nangal, which lies roughly 15 kilometers southeast of the town of Bijnor. In 2001, Nangal's population was about 5,300, of which 48 percent were Chamars, 26 percent Jats, and 12 percent Muslims. There was also a small population of non-Chamar SCs in Nangal, mainly Balmikis. The remaining population mainly comprised MBCs but included a few Brahmin households.

The Jats owned 83 percent of the agricultural land in Nangal in 2001, and 54 percent of the 198 Jat households possessed more than two hectares. Landownership was not the only basis for rural power in Nangal, but it remained

<sup>6</sup>For more on Bijnor District, see Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery (1997).

crucial in defining a household's economic and social position. Jats had reinvested agricultural surplus in small businesses—they managed a wood yard, two sugarcane processing units, and several shops and schools—and in efforts to position their sons in local government bureaucracies.

Jats' control over land in Nangal and the lack of nonfarm employment opportunities close to the village suggest that Dalit subordination is likely to be more intense in this village than in some other settlements in western UP. But there are other aspects of Nangal that suggest this village might be more advanced in terms of Dalit assertion. Nangal has a larger proportion of Dalits than many other villages in the region, and it is located in a district (Bijnor) where Mayawati won an election in 1989. Moreover, many ordinary Dalits in Nangal claimed that their village is less characterized by caste oppression than most neighboring villages.

The Chamars in Nangal were mainly employed as local manual wage laborers, often on the farms or in the small industrial units owned by Jats. There was only limited daily, weekly, or seasonal migration among Nangal Chamars out of the village. Within agriculture, Chamars worked as temporary daily wage laborers, paid between 25 and 50 rupees per day.<sup>7</sup> Yet they were often unable to obtain regular work or timely payment for their labor. In 2001, the Chamars possessed 8 percent of the agricultural land in Nangal. Of the 457 Chamar households in the village, only 1 percent owned more than two hectares and 77 percent were landless. Patterns of landownership were paralleled by inequalities in the material assets of Chamars and Jats; very few Chamars possessed the private tubewells that are common on Jat farms.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 56 percent of Chamars lived in brick built (*pakkā*) houses compared to 89 percent of Jats, and only 10 percent of Chamar households had televisions compared to 70 percent of Jats.

Inequalities rooted in land and material asset ownership were, in turn, reflected in Jats' and Chamars' differential access to new avenues of advancement based upon education. Nangal contained two government primary schools and three private primary schools run by local Brahmins. Jats dominated the management committee of the Nangal Junior High School, the larger and better-funded of the village's two secondary schools. The Ambedkar Junior High School catered mainly to Dalits, Muslims, and MBCs and ran classes up to eighth standard. While facilities and standards of teaching at the government primary schools and Ambedkar School were particularly poor, all of the primary and secondary schools in Nangal were underfunded, were badly maintained, and suffered from teacher neglect.

<sup>7</sup>In 2001, one U.S. dollar was equivalent to about 40 rupees.

<sup>8</sup>We do not have accurate figures on disparities in tubewell ownership, but Pant (2004) has pointed to widespread inequalities between higher castes and Dalits in access to tubewell irrigation across UP.



Jat households ensured that their sons entered school at an earlier age, moved more quickly through school, and stayed in formal education for longer than Chamars. Jats typically sent their sons to private primary schools in Nangal, which maintain a better standard of education than the schools used by Chamars and Muslims. Richer Jats often sent sons to secondary schools outside the village and sought extra-school tuition in urban areas. As a consequence, very few Jat boys dropped out of school. Although many educated Jat young men had been unable to obtain secure salaried work, they had been more successful than Chamars in the search for such employment. Jat young men were able to trade upon their slightly better education within government job markets and could mobilize caste or kinship connections with officers within relevant state bureaucracies. Jats also possessed the money to bribe officials within increasingly corrupt markets for state employment.

Boys' participation in mainstream schooling was much lower among Chamars. Chamar parents spoke of the crippling expense of secondary schools and the constant financial struggle that they faced to keep their children in formal education. At the same time, the number of boys being educated in secondary school rose among Chamars between 1990 and 2001 as a result of a perception of the value of Hindi education (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2004). Economic necessity forced most Chamars to send their children to local schools, where standards of instruction were well below those of most urban, private schools. Chamars said that open casteism involving the formal segregation of lower caste students in classes and maintenance of separate eating arrangements ended within schools in the 1960s. But some young Chamars reported teachers marking them down in examinations, interrupting their progression through school, making demands for bribes, and singling them out for humiliating punishments on account of their caste.<sup>9</sup>

Very few Chamar young men who obtained secondary schooling went on to capture salaried employment, in spite of reservations for Dalits in government jobs. Indeed, the proportion of Chamars in Nangal between the ages of twenty and thirty-four who were in secure salaried employment *fell* from 19 percent in 1990 to 9 percent in 2000. Chamars argued that reservations made little difference to their chances of obtaining government work because the competition for posts in the reserved quota was as fierce and corrupt as within the nonreserved sector. Chamars' less prestigious education, relative exclusion from social networks centered on government, and lack of money for bribes marginalized them in competition for government jobs relative to urban members of their caste and the Jats.

<sup>9</sup>Children were not passive in the face of this discrimination. Some Chamar students said that they had partially countered the effects of casteism by strategically mentioning or avoiding mentioning their caste or religious identity, publicizing acts of discrimination, seeking allegiances with sympathetic teachers, or forming close friendship networks within school.



In sum, Chamars remained economically impoverished relative to Jats. At the same time, the rise of education among Chamars and the simultaneous emergence of the BSP as a major political force in the state had had an impact upon Nangal village. Most notably, by the early 2000s in Nangal, a cohort of educated Chamar young men had emerged who lacked salaried employment but played a major role in the village in generating support for Dalit political organizations, assisting in social awareness campaigns, and acting as “cultural brokers” in the transmission of new ideas (Wolf 1956).

We examined these young men’s lives through survey work and ethnographic interviews. We began by undertaking a household census in Nangal as an update to an identical census carried out in 1990.<sup>10</sup> We then interviewed a purposive sample of parents and their children in households with young people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four. Our discussions were semistructured: We had a set of topics that we wanted to address with specific people. These related primarily to education, employment, marriage, and political activity and affiliations. We analyzed our interviews using the *Atlas.ti* data analysis package, using codes derived from our conceptual framework as well as ones generated inductively out of our research. We also conducted short periods of participant observation, usually in people’s homes, the fields, and village streets.

#### NEW POLITICIANS

There were six Chamar young men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four in Nangal in 2001 who were termed locally *naye netās* (new politicians). People sometimes used the epithet “new politician” semihumorously to mock the aspirations of ambitious young men, but they often employed the term more seriously to indicate men who circulated political rhetoric in the village and assumed organizational roles within local institutions. Villagers referred to these men as “new” politicians because they belonged to a section of rural society—the Chamars—formerly excluded from local representative and participatory politics. They also used the term “new politicians” to distinguish local young men with political aspirations from the more established Dalit politicians who regularly contested national or state-level elections and had developed a regional power base. Finally, the term “new” suggested the imagined connection between these young men and notions of progress (*prāgatī*) and development (*vikās*).

Brijpal came closest to conforming to the ideal type of a Chamar *netā*. Thirty-four in 2001, Brijpal lived in a small two-roomed brick house on the edge of Nangal with his wife—who was employed as a part-time government

<sup>10</sup>Jeffery and Jeffery conducted this census during a previous round of research in Bijnor District. The authors are grateful to the U.K. Overseas Development Administration for funding that research. For more on our research methods in western UP, see Jeffery and Jeffery (1997) and Jeffery (2000).

*ānganwadī* worker (nursery teacher)—and had two small children. Brijpal appeared to embody a form of distinguished Dalit masculinity that owes much to the example of Ambedkar: He was well groomed and wore clean white *kurtā pāujāmā*, a woolen waistcoat in colder weather, and smart leather sandals. Also reflecting broader cultures of Dalit political assertion, Brijpal's Hindi contained a large number of loan words from Sanskrit, and he regularly used stories and aphorisms in his speech.

Brijpal grew up in a household possessing 0.33 hectares of agricultural land. His parents worked as manual wage laborers in the village and were uneducated. Brijpal had studied up to tenth class at local schools and then attended a government-aided intercollege in Bijnor for his senior secondary school education. After leaving school, he obtained a master of commerce from a government degree college in Bijnor. At the same time, he studied for a polytechnic diploma in commercial practice from a private technical institute. Brijpal completed his formal education at Nainital, where he obtained master of arts at a government degree college. Lacking close relatives in influential positions within government service or large amounts of money to bribe state officials, Brijpal had been unable to obtain a government job. In the mid-1990s, he had worked on a voluntary basis as a clerk in a government subdistrict (*tehsil*) office and had then established a moderately successful agency selling cigarettes (*bīdī*) in and around the village.

Brijpal defined himself as a new politician. He had enrolled in the DS-4 in 1987 and joined the BSP in 1993. He had occupied a position on the Ambedkar Junior High School management committee in Nangal, served as a committee member within the government *panchāyat*, and unsuccessfully stood for the post of *pradhān* in the village *panchāyat* election. In addition, he acted as a lobbyist for some other Chamars in Nangal in their dealings with the state.

Brijpal exemplified the social position of Chamar *netās* in Nangal, who all came from households possessing small amounts of land and some urban social contacts. Of the six *netās* in Nangal, four had university degrees and two had high school qualifications. Three of the *netās* managed moderately successful small businesses in Nangal, two worked as contractors on construction projects funded by the state's Public Works Department, and one had a temporary job in a government bank. All the new politicians were married, in three cases to young women from urban areas.

Like Brijpal, *naye netās* in Nangal did not hold formal political offices outside the village, but three had good relationships with BSP politicians, and politicians frequently sought *naye netās*' help in garnering support before an election, raising political funds, and communicating political ideas. The Chamar *netās* sat on the management committees of local schools, held positions within the *panchāyat*, and assisted in the introduction of new government programs. Influenced by the rise of the BSP in UP and by a broader social process of "Ambedkarisation" (Pai and Singh 1997), *netās* worked within local nongovernmental

organizations representing Chamar interests, including a youth organization, a rotating credit scheme, and an adult literacy program. In addition, *netās* commonly worked as intermediaries within clientelistic networks that linked rural Chamars to local state officials. Like subaltern organic intellectuals in other contexts (Gramsci 1971), these men acted as political fixers in the efforts of friends and relatives to accomplish tasks through state officials. These forms of political brokerage were upsetting relationships between age and authority among Chamars in the village. Educated *naye netās*, with knowledge and experience outside Nangal, were better able to exercise power than were older caste members, who were increasingly dependent on younger men.

It is important to distinguish between the social and political work of Chamar *netās* and the efforts of government-employed Chamars to assist members of their caste. Chamar *netās* frequently argued that they were better positioned to help rural Chamars in their dealings with the state than educated Chamar young men who had entered government service. Some *netās* claimed that Chamars in government, who usually lived with their families in urban areas, had forgotten the plight of Nangal's Chamars. More commonly, they argued that Chamars who had obtained government positions did not have the time, influence, or confidence required to assist their peers in the village. *Netās* stressed that Chamars in government generally occupied low-ranking posts and remained fearful of offending upper-caste superiors.

Against the grain of *netās'* statements, we spoke to two educated Chamar men within government service who had assisted Chamars in Nangal. Birendra, born around 1940 and possessing a twelfth-class certificate, had obtained a reserved job as an office assistant in the Survey of India in 1971 and was posted in Delhi in 2001, where he lived with his family. In 1978, Birendra had helped establish Ambedkar Junior High School in Nangal and continued to play an advisory role in the development of the school in 2001. Birendra had also established the Ambedkar Youth Organization (AYO) in the late 1970s. The AYO attempted to spread knowledge of Ambedkar's teachings through organizing debates and dramas around the theme of Ambedkar's life. The AYO had also raised funds for the junior high school and was building a function room for Chamars in Nangal in 2001.

In his early thirties in 2001, Jaibir had been similarly influential. In 1997, Jaibir had obtained a post cleaning and repairing shoes in the Bijnor police force. In the early 2000s, he commuted daily from Nangal to Bijnor. In this position, he came into daily contact with senior figures in the police. On the basis of the social relationship he developed with the superintendent of police, Jaibir was able to mediate between Chamars in the village and the police force. He assisted in the resolution of disputes involving Nangal Chamars and Jats or police officers, and helped individual Chamars whom he felt had a legitimate basis for complaining about police maltreatment. This evidence counters an argument made by some observers of India that the entry of large numbers of Dalits into government employment may deprive the community of political leaders (see

Parry 1999). At the same time, however, government-employed Chamars stressed that the pressures of their work, relative remove from rural affairs, and limited influence prevented them from responding quickly and effectively to the demands placed on them by rural members of their caste, and that unemployed or underemployed *naye netās* were better able to assume these roles.<sup>11</sup>

*Netās* were also active in local government. Until the early 1990s, Chamars in Nangal could not overtly question the right of the Jats to “lead” the village within the *panchāyat*, and only once put forward a Chamar candidate for *pradhān*.<sup>12</sup> But the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992, by reserving positions on the *panchāyat* for SCs, offered a new path along which Dalits could seek power. In 1995, a new politician named Jogender captured the post of *pradhān*. Jogender’s wife, Guria, had formally won the post, since the *pradhān* position was reserved for an SC woman. But Jogender assumed effective control of the *panchāyat*. As *pradhān*, he improved the economic fortunes of a few poor Chamar households by increasing the proportion of development resources reaching Chamar and other Dalit areas of the village. Jogender ensured that thirty-eight households received 20,000-rupee loans through a government housing scheme,<sup>13</sup> bolstered Chamar access to school scholarship money,<sup>14</sup> and effectively lobbied the Block

<sup>11</sup>For an alternative reading of the political role of government-employed Dalits, see Jonathan P. Parry (1999). Parry argues that Dalits employed in a large steel plant in Bhilai, eastern India, have been able to play the types of practical and symbolic functions that we describe here as the prerogative of *naye netās*. While providing an important critique of some of the more pessimistic accounts of the impact of low-caste politics and reservations on Dalit communities, Parry does not adequately problematize the location of his account in an area of relatively abundant government work. It is likely that relationships of dominance are more entrenched in most parts of northern and central India than in the area surrounding a large government steel factory and in which there are in-migrants from across India.

<sup>12</sup>During this period, rich Jats periodically sought reelection by distributing largesse within the poorest parts of the village and intimidating voters on the eve of elections. For descriptions of this process in neighboring Meerut District, see G. K. Lietaen (1996).

<sup>13</sup>Since 1998, the government provided subsidized house loans through the Integrated Rural Development Program for households formally identified as Below the Poverty Line. Of those selected under this scheme, a household would receive a grant of 6,000 rupees and a further 14,000 rupees repayable at 12.5 percent annual interest. Of this 20,000 rupees, the government expected the household to spend 17,000 rupees on their house and 3,000 rupees on a latrine. Jogender tried to assist poor households in petitioning the Block Development Officer and higher officers to release money through this scheme. In the allocation of housing loans, Jogender prioritized assisting widows and those especially vulnerable within the village, and he favored Chamars—and especially those from his own neighborhood and kinspeople—over other groups. But recipients reported that they did not receive the full amount sanctioned and needed to pay a share to Jogender and to other officials whose support they needed.

<sup>14</sup>According to records kept at the Block Development Office, in 2000–2001, 149,500 rupees was allocated to Nangal children for scholarships. Jogender said that he paid close attention while *pradhān* to ensuring that scholarship money reached target households. Rural people complained about scholarship money arriving late, or of small sums being appropriated by the *pradhān* or schoolteachers, but most Nangal villagers said that they received at least three-quarters of the money to which they were formally entitled.

Development Office for increased funds through a government employment scheme, the Jawahar Rozgār Yojana.<sup>15</sup>

But *netās*' attempts to improve Chamars' political power and prosperity moderated rather than transformed processes of class and caste domination. Chamar social initiatives failed in part because *netās* sometimes prioritized their own interests over those of their caste. In spite of trying to help many Chamar families, Jogender defined himself as a profit-seeking broker (*dalāl*). He admitted that he had made a substantial amount of money working as *pradhān*, and our survey work suggests that the beneficiaries of his efforts to acquire more development resources for Chamars were concentrated among members of his extended kinship group and friendship network. *Netās*' inability to effect a more profound redistribution of political opportunities also reflected their poorly coordinated approach to changing rural society. For example, in 1997, after a series of factional disputes between different *netās* in Nangal, a delegation of new politicians finally went to petition the state government in Lucknow to obtain financial assistance for Ambedkar Junior High School. Ironically, this poorly planned and delayed expedition arrived in the state capital on the very day that the BSP fell from power. The *netās* returned empty-handed, and the Jat-run private secondary school in Nangal remained much better funded than the school bearing Ambedkar's name. Broader consideration of Chamar associational activity in Nangal points in a similar direction: Only twenty-four Chamar households had become involved in the Dalit rotating credit scheme, and few Chamar young people attended the AYO. A *netā*-led adult education scheme ceased altogether due to a lack of interest, and Jats blocked the efforts of Chamars to build a hostel for visiting wedding parties.

The failure of the *netās* to achieve a more radical social transformation also reflects the continued regional dominance of the higher castes. Jats were well equipped—economically, socially, and culturally—to counterresist lower-caste political assertion. At the economic level, Jats imposed sanctions on Chamar households that they perceived to be recalcitrant—for example, by withholding pay for labor services performed or by refusing to allow Chamars to collect fodder from their fields. Socially, Jats worked to broaden and expand their political networks by investing efforts in securing government posts for their sons and nurturing ties of mutual understanding and friendship within government bureaucracies in Bijnor. In this context, many Chamars were forced to go to

<sup>15</sup>Jawahar Rozgār Yojana (JRY) was an employment scheme established in 1988 providing employment to rural laborers and basic building materials for the construction of houses and roads. Of the JRY money, 60 percent had to be spent on labor; 22.5 percent was reserved for personal schemes for SCs; 3 percent was for the disabled; and the remaining 14.5 percent could be spent on bricks. In 1999–2000, 139,500 rupees came to Nangal through the JRY, which provided only about 2,700 days of labor per year for Dalits, equivalent to roughly five days of work each for landless household in Nangal.

Jats, rather than to Chamar *netās*, in order to obtain assistance in matters relating to the state. Some ordinary Chamars argued that powerful Jats were better able to lobby local state officials on their behalf than Chamar leaders in the village. Finally, at the cultural level, Jats sought to develop urban and urbane identities—for example, through their clothes, educational strategies, and room decorations—which served to mark new politicians and their Chamar peers as “backward” (*pichhe*) or uncouth. In particular, many Jats constructed large multistoried homes replete with modern goods, including televisions, refrigerators, and sometimes washing machines, which reinforced their local standing and separated them physically from Chamars.

*Netās*’ inability to coordinate their political actions and Jat counterresistance combined to severely limit opportunities for ground-level political change. The extent of continuity is especially evident in the case of the police, which continued to side with Jats in struggles over land, labor, or other resources (see Brass 1997). For example, in 1998, the police and local land revenue officer assisted Jats in stealing a large portion of Chamar land from the center of Nangal. In 2001, the police and judiciary turned a blind eye when many Jats withheld payment for agricultural labor and harassed Chamar women working in the fields. New politicians were sometimes able to intervene in these types of case, and we collected several examples of Brijpal and his peers preventing the police from bullying Chamar villagers. But *netās* had a limited stock of influence, and there were simply too few of these local-level lobbyists to serve the large number of poor Chamars in Nangal in their negotiations with the state and dominant Jats. An understanding of the dialectics of dominance and resistance in contemporary Nangal requires attention to the capacity of *naye netās* to mediate between “society” and “the state,” which are “new” forms of political activity in rural western UP, *and* consideration of older structures of dominance that prevent them from effecting a more substantial shift in power.

What emerged quite powerfully from our study was not just the frequency with which higher-caste dominance reasserted itself in the practices of the police, politicians, and other state representatives but also the strength of Chamars’ *feeling* of their poverty and social isolation. The prevailing political mood among Chamars was one of despondency, cynicism, and thinly veiled anger. Rather than being part of what some *netās* called the “chain” linking particular rural people to higher officials, local people said that they felt themselves “isolated” (*akelā*), “powerless” (*bekār*), and “wandering” (*ghūm rahe*). A belief that others lacked the capacity to empathize with the poor was woven through this sense of exclusion. In the type of statement that we heard repeated numerous times, a Chamar male laborer lamented,

Who will cry about our sadness? Who will listen to us? ... How can we complain to local state officials? The people to whom we would complain



are the same people about whom we would be complaining! So in this situation, we can do nothing. The Jats, in their big houses, are drinking our blood.

Our account of *naye netās* political practices contrasts with Krishna's (2004) discussion of political activists in Rajasthan and Gujarat, where similarly self-styled "new politicians" are allegedly capable of building "inclusive institutional structures" at the local level. By contrast, Chamar *naye netās* work mainly for some kin and political factions among the Chamars, and their efforts have been piecemeal and contradictory even in this respect. The divergence between our conclusions and those of Krishna (2004) regarding the social impact of *naye netās*' activity largely reflects differences between the social geography of Rajasthan/Gujarat and of western UP, where inequalities were more marked. But the differences in our accounts also relate to theoretical and methodological issues. In employing Putnam's (1993) work on social capital, Krishna risks downplaying analysis of class, caste, and gender inequalities in his research area.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Krishna's large-scale survey-based research, while possessing obvious strengths, leaves him rather poorly equipped to discuss how other villagers perceive *naye netās*' practices or measure their successes.<sup>17</sup> Adopting a more ethnographic approach, we suggest that new politicians only marginally improve the access of the rural poor to resources in western UP and that new politicians are thoroughly embroiled in processes that reproduce caste, class, and gender inequalities.<sup>18</sup>

#### NAYE NETĀS AS SOCIAL ANIMATORS

*Netās* played an important role in expressing political critique in Nangal and generating new forms of Chamar subjectivity. Chamars have long circulated ideas

<sup>16</sup>See also Ben Fine (2001), Jeffrey (2001), and John Harriss (2002). Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital predates the popular approaches advocated by James S. Coleman (1990) and Putnam (1993) and offers a more refined and coherent basis for critical social enquiry. Bourdieu's definition of social capital anticipates recent social scientific critiques of the term in several ways. Most notably, it pays attention to the role of the state and other forces in shaping social capital formation and avoids putting a positive or negative valuation on the possession of social capital.

<sup>17</sup>For example, Anirudh Krishna records that 53 percent of rural people responded to a questionnaire by noting that they approach *naye netās* in order to negotiate with the police. But this tells us rather little about how far marginalized agents are capable of convincing *naye netās* to act on their behalf or about the significance of durable inequalities in the negotiating positions of differently equipped rural people.

<sup>18</sup>Krishna credits *naye netās* with a capacity to escape caste as an ordering principle in society. He writes, "By looking to caste as a possible source of influence for themselves, they [*naye netās*] know they would be playing into the hands of the old leadership" (2004, 78). This statement raises a host of questions. Why have political parties not sought to mobilize *naye netās* on a caste basis? Does caste never act as a form of solidarity within informal political networks, for example within the police? (see Brass 1997; Jeffrey 2000). And how and why has lower-caste indignation and anger dissipated?



critical of the dominant castes in the village, and Chamars' verbal resistance to the upper castes in western UP was recorded in the district gazetteers as early as the 1890s (Nevill 1922). But Nangal's new politicians were much more explicit in their denunciations of caste than were an older generation of Chamar critics in the village. For example, in a group discussion at which two Brahmins and a Jat were present, Brijpal said,

Look at the atrocities committed by Hindus! They dump their liquor bottles close to Dalit houses. They have made liquor so cheap so that Dalits can buy it. Hindus do not accept that god is for everyone. No-one can buy god. We won't stay silent. We will raise our voices against these atrocities. We will tell other people that we are not below anyone. We want to have equal rights (*haq*) in the eyes of society.

As this statement implies, new politicians in rural Bijnor district tended to argue that humiliation rather than economic deprivation was the principal stumbling block in their rise to power. *Naye netās* frequently used references to continued caste discrimination in the village as a basis for defining their political project and fostering indignation among other Chamars.

*Netās* also used discussions of caste discrimination to stress the capacity of Dalits to overcome oppression. They typically elaborated on this idea with reference to a small number of Dalit "great men" who had triumphed in the face of higher-caste oppression. *Netās* derived these stories from the speeches of Dalit political leaders and they sometimes aped the gestures and rhetorical devices of leading politicians. Brijpal spoke passionately in his polished Sanskritized Hindi:

Jagjivan Ram<sup>19</sup> visited a Hindu temple and afterwards they washed the whole temple with milk! They thought that the whole temple had been defiled by Jagjivan Ram's visit. So you see the huge differences that people construct in their minds? We should oppose any religion in which people believe temples are ruined by Dalits' feet. Jotirao Phule<sup>20</sup> was invited to a Thakur [upper caste] wedding. A Hindu priest was reading from a sacred text. When the priest saw Jotirao Phule he said "who invited him to the wedding! This has made the whole wedding pointless! The marriage has been ruined! Who invited him?"

<sup>19</sup>Jagjivan Ram (1908–1986) was a Chamar from Bihar who became a leading figure in the Congress movement from the 1930s onward. Jagjivan Ram (1980) proposed that Dalits should seek to emulate higher castes within the existing Hindu caste system, which he did not explicitly critique.

<sup>20</sup>Jotirao Phule (1827–1890) was a member of the "untouchable" Mali (market gardener) caste who grew up in Poona, South India. Phule became a prominent low-caste activist whose teachings were founded on a vision of the distinctive non-Aryan origins of the Shudras and Atishudras (Dalits). He rejected notions of social mobility by emulating higher castes. For details of Phule's life and work, see Gail Omvedt (1995).

When people heard the priest's words, the Thakurs said "pandit jī what can we do?" The priest replied: "Something can still be achieved by beating the Chamar over the head with some shoes and driving him back home." On hearing this, the upper castes did what the priest had said. They beat Phule and sent him home. Phule was badly insulted by this. He decided that he should commit suicide. He saw no point in living when he wasn't going to be given any respect. While travelling along a road, Jotirao met another Chamar who asked him "Jotirao, where are you going?" Jotirao replied that he was going to kill himself. The Chamar said that dying is not a solution to the problem of disrespect. "You must fight for your rights [*haq*]," he said.

Much more than an older generation of Chamar critics in Nangal, who tended to restrict their antipathy to caste oppression to occasional acts of resistance and what James C. Scott (1985) has called "everyday forms of resistance," *netās* argued that Chamars in Nangal should act on these stories of discrimination and humiliation.

*Netās* claimed that education could provide local Chamars with the skills, knowledge, and bodily traits and capacities required to mount effective resistance to the higher castes. Government, media, and development organizations' representations of progress through education shaped *netās'* narratives. *Netās* argued that education provides the reading, writing, and mathematical skills required to protect Chamars from the threat of higher-caste trickery. They also said that education offers the intelligence (*hoshūyārī*) and individual and collective self-awareness (*jagārūk*) necessary for effective political resistance. The most strident statements regarding the value of education for a program of Chamar political empowerment related to the alleged role of education in instilling civilizational traits and embodied confidence. In a typical statement, one *netā* told us,

The greatest benefit of education is the appearance of civilization that it provides. Men become civilized. They develop good manners. Others see the benefits: they know that we are well-mannered. ... Educated people fearlessly demand their rights. Education provides so much confidence that the educated aren't afraid of any [government] official. And people don't try any nonsense with the educated because they know that the educated possess knowledge and understanding of the law.

*Netās* discussed confidence with reference to the terms *himmat* or *hoslā*, which commonly connoted courage in the face on adversity. But they were equally eager to stress the importance of education in inculcating inner confidence encapsulated in the Hindi word *atmvishvās* (literally, self-trust).

Building on these narratives of educational value, *netās* argued that a person's ability to acquire and display an educated demeanor offers a more appropriate basis for assessing their standing in society than caste (*jāti*). *Netās* made this

argument in a strong moral language and with reference to those aspects of Chamars' demeanor formerly associated with their caste subordination. They praised the meticulous hygiene and careful self-presentation characteristic of educated Chamars and contrasted images of educated Chamar cleanliness with those of higher caste young men who drink alcohol, refuse to wash, and greedily hoard money in their houses. In insisting upon education rather than caste as a measure of respect and moral maturity, Chamar *naye netās* also criticized and sought to replace the abstract categories employed by the state to label them, such as "Scheduled Caste" or "Below the Poverty Line" and stress their entitlement to participate in modern politics as knowing, ethical, competent agents.

But in imagining a program of political reform centered on the transformation of the Chamar body in local social space, *netās* offered only a limited critique of the caste system. They did not seek to eradicate social hierarchies or associated forms of subordination but argued instead that these stigmatizing labels should not be attached to them as "educated people."<sup>21</sup> *Netās* maintained that higher castes who behaved in the manner of illiterates deserved disrespect, and their ultimate goal was to invert rather than transcend the hierarchical caste system. The politics of the Hindu Right also colored *netās*' political statements. Chamar *netās* emphasized Chamar progress through reference to the relative backwardness of rural Muslims, who were depicted as having too many children, possessing little interest in education, and being somehow more intimately connected to the dirt and dust (*dhūl mithī*) of the village.

*Netās* argued that Chamar political mobilization requires capturing state power. They claimed that the BSP leader, Mayawati, had reformed the UP bureaucracy and improved Dalits' access to a variety of government programs. During Mayawati's tenure as chief minister in 1997, teachers arrived at local government schools promptly and bureaucrats were compelled to curb—or at least disguise—their venality and discriminatory practices. Building on these observations, *netās* also commonly argued that the BSP is capable of creating an environment conducive to the expression of a new Chamar educated courage (*himmat*) and unity (*ektā*). *Netās* were similarly convinced that Mayawati's return to government would trigger wide-ranging reform of the police, judiciary, and other arms of the local state. Underlying this belief in the BSP was a sense that the government might effectively address the problems of Dalit poverty and social isolation through policies aimed at improving Dalit representation within educational institutions and government. *Netās* energetically advanced the view that reservations, while inadequate as a basis for wholesale Dalit empowerment, are an important tool for social mobility and symbol of Ambedkar's political labor.

<sup>21</sup>Scholars who have conducted research on Dalit politicians' strategies in urban UP in the twentieth century have made similar points (see Cohn 1954; Gooptu 1993; Khare 1984; Lynch 1969).

Jats attempted to undermine *netās*' cultural work through two linked discursive strategies. First, Jats questioned the cultural authority of educated Chamars, who, they said, lacked "proper" (*thīk*) schooling credentials and were only *shaksha* (qualified), not *shikshit* (educated). They also said that Chamars retain certain distinctive markers (*nishānī*) that mark them out as uncouth, such as nasalizing their vowel sounds, engaging in inappropriately showy acts of consumption, or failing to appreciate the "true value" of education. These critiques were sometimes infused with Hindu nationalist religious chauvinism: Jats marked Chamars as inferior because low castes lacked the disciplined, moral education available in the *shishu mandir* primary schools run by Brahmins in Nangal and mainly enrolling Jat children. That Jats chose to focus on education reflects *netās*' success in delegitimizing public discussion of caste in Nangal. In public, at least, Jats were not arguing that Chamars were inferior by dint of their birth but as a result of various "traits" that they had failed to acquire in their households and through schooling.

A second strategy employed by the Jats was to neutralize *netās*' critiques of caste and class inequality by vastly exaggerating the scale and nature of Dalit economic, social, and political transformation. They spoke of a Dalit revolution (*Dalit krantī*) wherein Chamars, pampered by the state, now possessed more money and greater political power than impoverished and isolated Jats. On numerous occasions, Jats told us of Chamars moving around the village showing off expensive consumer goods—Sony stereos, Western clothes, new televisions—while impoverished Jats glumly worked the fields in their traditional white *kurtā pāujāmā*. Jats used these stories to justify oppressive practices and create a sense of shared caste solidarity in Nangal. Our urban interviews with government officials, teachers, and politicians suggest that the notion of a substantial and ongoing Dalit revolution was also widely accepted by middle-class Dalits in Bijnor town. This growing consensus around revolution militated against the formation of ties between urban Dalit intellectuals and ordinary Chamars in rural Bijnor District.

Notwithstanding Jat counternarratives, Chamars were partially effective in promoting their political discourses among members of their caste in Nangal. In circulating discourses critical of upper-caste discrimination, identifying a new cultural ideology distinct from caste, and stressing the capacity of the state to assist in processes of Chamar empowerment, *netās* played a crucial role in politicizing the local Chamar population. *Naye netās*' narratives raised public awareness of caste discrimination, encouraged discussion of party and regional politics in the village, and generated support for Mayawati and the BSP. *Netās* had also played a major role in encouraging people to vote.

But *netās* were only partially successful in convincing other Chamars of their vision of progress. Chamars frequently challenged *netās*' vision of the collective strength of their caste—for example, by arguing that Chamars lack unity and that the poor among the Chamars are socially isolated. Many parents contested the

notion that formal school education would provide a firm basis for a program of empowerment by speaking of the value of learning outside school and of the arrogance of the formally “educated.” In addition, most Chamars were skeptical about the potential for Mayawati to transform people’s lives. Chamars said that they voted for the BSP and that Mayawati’s stints as chief minister in 1995 and 1997 had been of “some benefit,” for example, in ensuring that government officials arrived at work on time. But most Chamars argued that their problems were too chronic, varied, and entrenched to be solved by the BSP. Similarly, they said that reservations in government employment amounted to a sop thrown to Dalits to prevent widespread unrest. They went on to argue that a government truly committed to raising Dalits’ position in society would improve laborers’ rights, working conditions, and wages.

Disillusioned by *netās*’ narratives of progress and their associated ideas of acquiring power through education and state-led development, rural Chamars often stressed the need for more radical political change—for example, through state efforts to improve Chamars’ access to land, education, and health care. These Chamars argued that “respect” for the low castes was impossible without a major redistribution in economic and social resources. In a typical statement, a landless Chamar man told us that,

In my heart, I want to go into the Jat fields and set fire to them. We [Chamars] go to do laboring work in the Jat fields and these bastards swear at us and we come home dejectedly. May they be cursed, may they become ill, may their children not be able to walk. In their hearts, the Jats do not want the Chamars to be able to have stoves burning in their homes; they want Chamar children to die hungry.

That Chamars felt willing and able to express these ideas to social researchers reflects the success of naye *netās* in politicizing caste inequality in the village. Moreover, the use of the collective pronouns, “us” and “we,” by this laborer is significant; there was a sense of collective possibility among Chamars in the early 2000s that Craig Jeffrey did not observe in neighboring Meerut district in the mid-1990s (Jeffrey 2001). But this sense of possibility had not led to a substantial transformation in the relationship between caste and power. Furthermore, the statements of anger that we heard from “ordinary” Chamars in Nangal were not used—as they were among *netās*—to express a sense of new opportunity for change or as a preface to discussing the possibilities of state-directed development. Rather, ordinary Chamars in Nangal believed that their hardships and deprivations were multiplying and that politics (*rājnitī*) was unlikely to alleviate their deprivation. In this context, many *netās* struggled to maintain their credibility within the community, and many Chamar jokes centered on the figure of the faintly ridiculous and overly optimistic local *netā*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of new politicians in UP should prompt a reevaluation of notions of “Dalit revolution.” Several recent studies have proposed that widespread Dalit political resistance in North India is resulting in a profound shift in the balance of power at the local level. In this narrative, a “rural elite” comprising either upper castes or locally dominant intermediate castes is increasingly being forced to share power with Dalits (Jaffrelot 2003; Mendelsohn 1993). Jaffrelot (2003), in particular, has argued that a transformation in local power relations in rural UP is significantly advanced on the ground.

Our account provides some support for Jaffrelot’s argument. A small set of confident, articulate, and socially skilful “new politicians” was becoming more prominent among Chamars in Nangal in 2001. These men were improving poor people’s access to state services, politicizing the Chamar population, and circulating visions of ongoing political transformation. The rise of these *naye netās* points to the potential for formal political change combined with increased educational access to improve the prospects of individual families from marginalized communities.

At the same time, however, our account suggests that the rise of the lower-caste parties has not resulted in increased leverage and political power for Dalits on the ground, as it has in South India (Hasan 2001) and in pockets of UP where the higher castes are less dominant (Lerche 1995). The majority of Chamars in Nangal remained dependent on a locally dominant caste of Jats. Chamars were confined to poorly paid, insecure, manual wage labor and owned little or no land. The entrenched nature of Chamar deprivation prevented new politicians from generating a popular movement for social change or radically improving the political mood, and it restricts Dalits’ capacity to express democratic ideas in the face of more powerful local actors. *Contra* Varshney, then, there are important *connections* between people’s socioeconomic position and their level of democratic engagement (see also Heller 2000).

The disjuncture between our account and those of Jaffrelot (2003) and Varshney (2000) partly reflects methodological differences. In particular, Jaffrelot’s history of lower-caste political change lacks close reflection on the links between national-level policy changes and everyday political practice. Pai (2000) is more attentive to these connections, but, like Krishna (2003), she moves too readily from the accounts of a small group of Dalit “intellectuals” to draw broad conclusions about social upheaval. Pai also studied highly unusual villages: semiurbanized settlements with a plentiful supply of off-farm employment in a prosperous part of western UP. Akhil Gupta’s (1998) more ethnographic analysis of changing rural politics reflects to a greater extent on the diversity of Dalits’ political sensibilities. But he worked in a village where almost all Dalits owned land and which lacked a strong class of rich farmers.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Unusually for villages in western UP at that time, only one of the rich farmers in Alipur owned a tractor in the early 1980s (Gupta 1998).



Pai and Gupta might respond by arguing that Nangal itself is in some way “unusual.” We would acknowledge that there are aspects of the village, especially Jats’ control over land and the distance of the village from nonfarm employment, that would lead one to expect high levels of Dalit subordination. But middle-ranking castes control landownership in large parts of western UP, and many villages are located at a distance from nonfarm employment opportunities. Moreover, there are dimensions of Nangal’s situation that make it *more*, not *less*, likely that Dalit revolution would be taking place: Nangal possesses a relatively high proportion of Chamars and is located in a district historically associated with the rise of Mayawati.

Pai and Gupta might also counter our argument by noting that they are only describing a *partial* transformation in the relationship between caste and power, and this is certainly true of Pai’s (2002) most recent work. Jaffrelot (2003), too, acknowledges the continued dominance of the higher castes over some forms of economic and social influence in the conclusion to his influential book. For example, Jaffrelot claims that the dominant castes have been much better able than Dalits to capture valued private-sector employment in the wake of the liberalization of the Indian economy. Our argument is therefore not that Jaffrelot wholly misrepresents the nature of social transformation in the 1990s and early 2000s Uttar Pradesh. But, in foregrounding political revolution, claiming that this revolution is “significantly advanced” on the ground, and arguing that a full revolution is likely to occur “in the next several decades,” Jaffrelot overstates the scale and inevitability of Dalit social mobility in UP.

Jaffrelot, Pai, and Gupta might also challenge our analysis by claiming that, even if lower caste politics has not substantially altered the distribution of social and economic opportunities in society, the lower castes have nevertheless achieved much at the symbolic level, a point that has also been made by Varshney (2000) and Kohli (2001). But this argument—that respect and confidence not economic rights are the preoccupation of Dalits and that low castes will derive satisfaction from the success of their leaders—has not been adequately field-tested in contemporary India. Certainly, this argument is at odds with the views of the majority of ordinary Dalits in Nangal who believe that the goals of improving their access to resources and claiming respect are intimately linked. Outside a small circle of *netās*, Dalits in our field area bitterly resented the BSP’s failure to address issues of distributive justice in a credible manner.

We highlight these points mindful of how debates about social mobility and revolution have been politicized on the ground. Some Jats in Nangal advanced arguments about lower-caste “revolution” (*krantī*) to justify oppressive practices and to convince others of Jat backwardness. This formed part of a wider move among Jats to demonstrate their alleged social and economic deprivation in order to obtain “Other Backward Class” status. In the early



2000s, we met several Jats in a university in neighboring Meerut district who translated articles on Dalit political advance available in such publications as *Frontline* and *Economic and Political Weekly* into Hindi and circulated these among students as evidence of Jats' lowly position within local social hierarchies.

Jaffrelot employs the term "*silent* revolution" to signal the relatively calm nature of the social transformation he identifies, a calmness he links to the gradual form that the revolution is taking and divisions within the lower-caste movement. But we would do well to reflect on the analytical work that the epithet "silent" performs. We have suggested that, insofar as Dalits were mobilizing for political change, they were doing so in a loud and articulate manner, and their activity generated similarly noisy counterresistance on the ground. Indeed, the process of "raising voice" (*awāz uthāna*) has itself become an object of discourse in grassroots processes of Dalit mobilization. The notion of "silent revolution" detracts from these important aspects of local political struggle.

Our analysis therefore points to the need for an organizationally and culturally sensitive political economy approach to contemporary South Asian political dynamics that accords Dalits' own "voices" a prominent position. This approach does not dispute the value of aggregated political analyses or of the type of ethnographic work exemplified in Jaffrelot's scholarship, but seeks to hold alongside such accounts political anthropologic reflection on ground-level practice and subjective understanding of political processes. This argument parallels Tania Li's (2005) recent critical engagement with the work of Scott (1998) on the state. Our appeal is for a closer engagement with what Li's calls *metis*, which she defines as contextualized forms of knowledge and practice that lie outside the purview of state planners and tend to be ignored in political science work. The appeal for a greater emphasis on this "messy" sphere of practice takes on a particular urgency in a scholarly climate in which fewer and fewer scholars of South Asia have the time, funding, and inclination to conduct "fieldwork" in the traditional anthropological sense, and in which there is often a marked disjuncture between formal political change and ground-level political realities.

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